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ABSTRACT

Rather than simply transferring the patterns and materials used in graduate school demography studies to the undergraduate curriculum in population education, it is argued that certain objectives should be established for the education of students in accordance with their special needs. Four kinds of demography--folk, citizen's, scholar's and humanist's--are identified and described. Folk demography allows the student to view himself as a population actor, to see himself as part of larger trends and to recognize his contribution to them. Citizen's demography requires an understanding of population literacy and of the interpretation of evidence and the development of judgements about facts and figures. The perspective of a scholar's demography is based on research processes. Humanist's demography views population as a key to understanding of the history of society and of ideas. Concluding remarks reiterate that courses should be organized around what the student should know and indicate two problems for further consideration, the specific concepts and findings to be communicated to undergraduates and the place for population concerns within the curriculum. (Author/KSM)

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THE CONTENT OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN POPULATION STUDIES[1/]

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In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest expressed in population education (Viederman: 1972). The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future emphasized the importance of these developments in noting that "if Americans now and in future generations are to make rational, informed decisions about their own and their descendants' future, they must be provided with far more knowledge about population change and its implications than they now possess" (1972, 79). Accordingly, the Commission recommended that federal funds be provided to assist school systems in establishing programs in population education.

Such developments are to be applauded. But within this new concern for population education, the great emphasis has been placed upon efforts at the elementary and secondary school level. Undergraduate education in

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The insights of Leon Clark, Stephen Viederman, and Sloan Wayland into the problem considered in this paper are gratefully acknowledged. But since none of the three were consulted directly during its writing, they do not share responsibility for its shortcomings.

population studies has been orphaned in the process. The reasons for this situation are not malicious. It just seems that few persons seem to think of instruction in population studies as education. Rather, the field is viewed as one primarily devoted to research with a parallel emphasis upon graduate training. For most professional demographers, undergraduates merely represent a necessary hazard in basing one's operation in an academic setting.[2/] Certainly, population studies is not unique in this respect. One needs only to consider the suspicion, even hostility, with which "educators" are viewed by their colleagues with credentials in academic disciplines.

As a consequence, undergraduate education tends to be modelled after the arrangements that characterize graduate training. In the process, a great deal is lost. Teachers lose sight of the fact that they are teaching students and not just a "subject." Courses are not designed to meet the needs of students, but rather they fit the earlier training and research interests of the instructor. For example, how many college teachers of population studies ever set objectives for their classes and then arrange the course materials to agree with them?

This paper is a modest attempt to argue that the latter procedure might be quite appropriate in the context of undergraduate education. Rather than simply transferring the patterns (and materials) used in graduate school to the undergraduate curriculum, certain objectives should

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[2/] For the purposes of discussion, this paper will not consider the efforts of those who approach the teaching of population "problems" from an activist's perspective. This is another problem altogether.

be established for the education of students in accordance with their special needs. Four kinds of demography--folk, citizen's, scholar's, and humanist's--are identified and described. The specific concepts and techniques that should be taught are not considered here. Although they can be derived from the points that are discussed, these are topics for another agenda. Instead, the discussion centers upon the specification of the general content of the undergraduate curriculum with respect to population-related material.

Folk Demography

In Socrates' dialogue with Meno, he demonstrates to him that his slave boy "knows" elaborate ideas in geometry despite his lack of schooling (1956: 107-114, 130-140). This process of drawing ideas from an uneducated household servant, described by Plato as "mental midwifery," is crucial to the notion of folk demography. Too often we begin instruction on population issues as if students have no knowledge of them when in fact this is an erroneous assumption. Students (and others) possess a knowledge of population that Sloan Wayland (1972) calls "folk demography."

> Folk demography is built on the perceptions and interpretations of the phenomena that are studied by the professional demographer. People experience reproduction, growth or decline in size of families, communities, or other aggregates, death at various ages, general and selective migration, sex ratios, and all the other experiences which the demographer studies (p. 8).

Following the model of Socrates' challenging Meno, one could ask, for example, if an Indian villager has a perception of child survivorship rates and life expectancy. In a nation where there is a goal of having at least one surviving son in old age so that burial rites can be performed, the answer is obvious (Ibid, 9).

Therefore, any course concerned with population problems has an impressive resource at its disposal: its students' knowledge of population processes and their consequences. This knowledge may be unpolished and undisciplined, as was the understanding of geometry by Meno's slave boy, but it represents a quite different starting point for a course than might be traditionally dictated. The teacher's role may be less that of instruction about basic facts than that of assisting students to organize their knowledge in some coherent way (Ibid., 10).

This process of basing instruction on folk demography has an interesting consequence. It means that the student will come to view himself as a population actor. Population trends at a societal level result from the aggregation of thousands of decisions made by individual actors. These decisions are conditioned and channeled by social and psychological circumstances, e.g., economic fluctuations and changing expectations, but the decisions of individuals are still the key to understanding. If students see themselves as part of these larger trends and recognize their contributions to them, then population studies becomes more meaningful.

Citizen's Demography

Students also need to be educated in what might be called a citizen's demography.[3/] While this is true at all levels of educational endeavor,

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3/ Wayland (1972) also uses this term, but its application here varies slightly from his use. He describes it as the result of a process of moving students from folk demography to a higher level of sophistication. Here, division of this process into two dimensions is emphasized.

it is especially proper at a collegiate level where attention is ostensibly paid to preparing persons for roles of leadership. The ability to make wise decisions about population policies and other actions with a demographic dimension requires an understanding of a wide range of materials.

This understanding has two dimensions. First, it involves population literacy. In a nation where studies have shown that six out of ten persons did not know the size of the population within 50 million persons, nothing could be more obvious (Commission of Population Growth: 1972, 79). College students (and others) should be knowledgeable about certain basic demographic facts and concepts if they are to play a role as architects of the American future.

But perhaps as importantly, a citizen's demography requires preparation in the interpretation of evidence and the development of judgements about facts and figures. The ability to understand a table, to calculate a rate, or to use census materials are skills that can easily be transmitted during an undergraduate course in population. Factual information about population is valuable, but the knowledge of sources and analytic procedures provide flexibility that will serve the student even better in the future.

This is not a small point. With the disappearance of courses in logic, argumentation and debate, and even statistics from either the curriculum or from students' programs due to the elective system, something has been lost in preparing them to interpret information, assemble evidence, and make judgments. Courses on population problems provide an excellent opportunity to develop such skills. Be it in exercises on

rate construction, in finding information in census volumes, or in understanding the Ehrlich-Common debate on the contribution of population growth to environmental difficulties, such courses can play a role in preparing students for something called citizenship. Despite the cliche, is not this task a reasonable one in a college education?

Scholar's Demography

There is a third prepsective on population studies that needs to be taught to college students--that of a scholar's demography. Since this approach is based upon research processes in a discipline that is strongly research-oriented, one might feel that it would be the easiest to design and teach. But not only is this approach the most difficult to communicate, it is also the most subversive. Its materials are not empirical findings or specific research approaches, but the basic attitudes that underlie scholarship such as accuracy, skepticism, and objectivity. A scholar's demography does not depend upon the memorization of long lists of demographic facts of familiarization in the life table construction and census procedures, although such information may be important. Rather, it is rooted in the cumulative, but uncertain quality of knowledge.

Few instructors teach about population in the way that they do research. In most excursions into scholarship (assuming away the frequent discrepancy between demographic research and scholarship), there is a process of venturing into an area that is unknown and uncertain. There are two factors that are operative in this process. One, the joy of finding something, can be conveyed to students with the new technology available for classroom instruction. Imaginative use of interactive computers in

student-designed investigations such as Dartmouth's Project IMPRESS are but one example.

But the other factor, perhaps best described as education for uncertainty, is much more difficult to communicate to students. The ability to absorb new ideas and evidence is limited at all levels of science if one accepts the arguments of Kuhn (1970) and others and too much cannot be expected of undergraduates. But it can be argued that most American students are handed their education in a most certain way until they reach the doctoral level (at least), and, of course, only a few reach that point. The rest have been conditioned to accept the statements of teachers and textbooks on faith, to refrain from asking questions and to remain docile at all times.

To many, this assertion will seem to be empty rhetoric that is characteristic of educational utopians. While the point could undoubtedly be clearer, its accuracy can be assessed in a simple test. The concept (theory? notion?) of the demographic transition is taught in nearly every course in population studies, but how is it encountered or taught? Just why did mortality decline in Western Europe? Was it due to medical improvements, public health reforms, or social and economic development? What do researchers like McKeown and Record, Krause, Razzell, Fredericksen, and others argue about on these points? How transferable is the Western experience (and our understanding of it) to the developing world? Answers to these questions require more than the brief introductory lecture that most instructors devote to the demographic transition, handling the evidence in a straightforward, unargumentative, certain way.

Obviously, no one can handle many topics in such appropriately elaborate ways. But students need to be educated about uncertainty. Just as a scholar knows the complexities and subtleties of his topic, students need to learn that there are complexities and subtleties. In courses in population studies, at least some exposure to a scholar's demography should be provided for each student.

At this point, as noted above, communication of the scholar's approach can become subversive. But while high school teachers, underprepared in their field and confronted with problems of classroom discipline, might legitimately fear any erosion of their "authority," good college teachers should welcome it.

Humanist's Demography

Finally, there is a closely related area of population studies that, for the lack of a better phrase, might best be called "humanist's demography." At the very least, this term should remind us that "population" is not just a term delineating numbers of persons (or other "units"), but that it is a concept that is important to our intellectual tradition. The manner in which population has been viewed is a key to understanding of the history of society and of ideas. Understanding of Plato's Republic, merchantilist thought, and various expressions of Realpolitik are but a few obvious examples in which such knowledge is important.

Unwitting support for this point can be found in the following statement on the implications that Marx and Malthus have for contemporary demography in Donald Bogue's Principles of Demography (1969), one of the most authoritative textbooks on the subjects presently available.

> ... It is difficult to point to anything original, either methodological or substantive, in the writings of Malthus that can be cited as a major contribution of lasting influence in shaping either theory or research....(p. 13).
>
> Karl Marx, the most powerful critic of Malthus, may also be dismissed as being largely irrelevant to the mainstream of modern empirical demography.... It is difficult to trace any lasting methodological or theoretical development to his influence, either directly or indirectly.... (p. 15, emphasis supplied).
>
> The work of these two men is mentioned here so that it may be largely dismissed from consideration in the remainder of this book. The author would like to propose a slogan: "Demographers of the world unite--in burying the population theories both of Malthus and of Marx." (p. 17)

Bogue, of course, is correct in one part of his assessment: an understanding of Marx and Malthus as population strategists is not a requirement for the mastery of modern empirical demography. But should we consider such mastery as the ultimate goal of demographic study? Surely, the importance of Marx and Malthus and the ideas that they advanced cannot be ignored by anyone who claims to be well-educated. Indeed, such awaremess is necessary to escape a merely vocational approach to population studies--a condition which seems implicit in the phrase "modern empirical demography."

Even for those who insist upon relevance as a justification for their labors, there is a need to consider the "humanist's demography." As long as contemporary architects of population policy (or non-policy) operate from a Marxian of Malthusian stance, demographic questions that some might prefer to reserve for political economists should command more general attention. Indeed, they are requisites for population literacy. As long as reports like the Limits to Growth (1972) take an identifiably Malthusian approach complete with its inherent difficulties, then it may be wise to remember our intellectual ancestors.

Conclusion

This discussion of the content of population education for undergraduates has been limited to identification of several large categories that should be considered in organizing appropriate courses or curricula. It does not confront two important questions. First, what are the specific concepts and findings that should be communicated to undergraduates? Second, where in the curriculum should these things be taught? A full discussion of these questions must await another occasion, but a brief consideration of each is appropriate here.

It is important to identify those specific items that should be in a student's possession when he or she completes a college course in population (or college itself). But these should be identified by many persons and not just a single individual. For example, what should a student know about a life table or cohort fertility? I would argue that an understanding of life expectancy should not be limited to future actuaries and that the concept of cohort is crucial to many concerns of the social sciences. But others may not agree, although consensus would probably emerge if a number of persons were questioned.

But this is not the key point. Rather, the fact that courses should be organized around what the student should know is crucial. In addition, the description of the four kinds of demography suggest something else of importance. Emphasis should not be placed upon facts and figures, but on processes, skills and concepts. Given the rapidity of contemporary fertility changes in the United States it is entirely possible that last year's graduates learned different facts than this year's sophomores.

Would it not be better to stress more general ideas and to show students where they can find data if they need to know it?

The second point about where population concerns should be placed in the curriculum points to a dilemma. Theoretically, it should not matter. As long as the important ideas and concepts are taught, they could be encountered at any point during a student's academic career. But the arrangements dictated by an academic division of labor and increasing specialization suggest that persons charged with sound instruction in population processes might place their concerns together in one place, i.e., a course or courses, where they can assure that appropriate ideas are indeed covered.

For this discussion, however, a more important point should be made. The way in which the content of population education is organized here could be applied to any other problem area in the social sciences, and probably in other areas as well. For example, the words "environmental studies" or "law" or even "chemistry" can be substituted for the term "demography" without major change in the argument. The concerns that are discussed here with reference to population studies can be made convincingly about these other areas. I would submit that this occurs because the same kinds of answers emerge whenever you consider what students should know when developing courses and curricula.

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